

Critics'

THEATRE REVIEWS

1942

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†"Autumn Hill" opened Monday, April 13th, at the Booth Theatre.

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THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Critics' Theatre Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

NEW YORK SUN
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"

NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN

Place this week's reviews with preceding weekly reviews so as to have always an up to date file of the New York Stage.

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"Yesterday's Magic"

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
April 15, 1942

Theatre Guild Stages 'Yesterday's Magic'

Paul Muni in Play About Broken
Down Actor Trying for Great
Comeback

By JOHN ANDERSON

THEMPT a star with the part of a broken down old actor trying to stage a great comeback and the chances are that in nine cases out of ten your star will grab the play, plot, lines, and especially sinker.

Let an actor write the play and you'll have something like Ivor Novello's "The Curtain Rises," which at least has the witty merit of being about Mrs. Patrick Campbell, or you will have something awash with the old hoke, such as "Yesterday's Magic" by Emyln Williams, which the Theatre Guild brought to its own theatre last night.

Since Mr. Williams contributed heavily to our theatre last season with "The Corn Is

Green" he may be forgiven his present error, with the warning that "Yesterday's Magic" is both greener and cornier.

The fact that an actor of Paul Muni's talents can find no better script than this is merely further evidence that there are simply no good plays around.

I hear from grouching authors that the theatre managers simply won't take chances nowadays, but if they take chances on such plays as this one, and the one the night before, the week before, and the month before the argument doesn't sound very reasonable, unless, of course, the managers have given up reading for the duration. It seems likelier that the writers have given up writing.

Doubtless the formula for plays of this sort is fairly familiar, and it is certainly obvious. There is always the opening scene of the elderly has-been, living dimly and forgotten amidst the memories of a glorious past. Ah, yes, you can hear them at the drop of a cue, sighing for that wonderful night of triumph these years ago when as the Lord or Lady Macbeth, as the case may be, as Hamlet, Electra, Richard or the hideous Hedda, this now waning star touched the proud zenith and the world trembled at the wonder of it. There may even be a yellowish wisp of criticism, God forbid, to prove it.

Into the Bathos

Given that springboard and you have everything for the plunge into the bathos. There is a moment when the fallen star smirks grease paint; or hears the far-off alluring murmurous applause. The nostrils flare, the eyes gleam as if moving into the spotlight, and the foot stamps impatiently for the boards. Egad, sir, there's life here and another performance. Make way. No actor likes

to admit that farewell means anything more than au revoir.

The ending is interchangeable and adjustable. Mr. Williams chooses the sad one of the old boy getting plastered as he was getting ready to play "King Lear" at Covent Garden. (Why must it always be Lear?) So when he finds by painful screeching that he is wrecking his crippled daughter's life he leaps to death, swapping yesterday's magic for today's reality.

Denham Directs

Unfortunately for the play at the Guild Mr. Williams has been unbelievably routine in handling the situation. The play is merely a succession, slow paced and deadening, of clichés which take longer to pass a given point than seems humanly possible. There is a collection of stock characters living in the tawdry rooming house in London, and as usual, some wealthy old admirer of the star, with money, of all things, in the bank.

Reginald Denham's direction is tedious and sluggish, but there are some excellent performances. For an actor of Mr. Muni's perception and power such stuff must seem hardly more than kindergarten exercises, but he goes through them with scrupulous care. Jessica Tandy plays the daughter with such warmth, such understanding and fine feeling that some of her scenes glow in the presence of a luminous performance. Brenda Forbes provides some infrequent laughs with a hilarious sketch of a bedraggled landlady. Margaret Douglass is immensely amusing in a skimpily written portrait of an "angel" and Alfred Drake portrays the young man in the daughter's life acceptably.

I only wish they all had something better to do—a good play for instance.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
April 15, 1942

Paul Muni Plays an Old Actor in Yesterday's Magic

By JOHN MASON BROWN

AS IS scarcely news, Paul Muni is an admirable performer. Moreover, he doubtless does an admirable job in a leisurely, slow, movie kind of way as the drunken old actor who tries to stage a comeback in Yesterday's Magic. But throughout the whole long evening Emyln Williams' drama hangs about Mr. Muni's neck like a flock of albatross.

Just why good actors are unable to resist playing old actors who have been praised by Sir Henry Irving, I do not pretend to know. Perhaps, it's because of the sentimental love they feel for "The Profession." Perhaps, it's because they welcome a chance to let go and act up in a big way. In any case, their eagerness to play such roles must be set down as an occupational disease. They take to them as

avidly as patients compare their operations, as busmen go on holidays or as critics discuss other critics.

What Mr. Muni, with obviousunction, is lending his fine gifts to just now is a slow, sentimental and dullish yarn about an old actor who, after having been too drunk to open at Covent Garden, finally kills himself so that his crippled daughter may feel free to leave him and marry the man she loves.

What was he going to play, this old fellow who at the dress rehearsal taught the younger generation a lesson in acting? Three guesses. What is it that they always play in dramas of this kind? Who is it that Morris Carnovsky is donning a white beard to represent toward the end of Cafe Crown this very season? King Lear, of course. And King Lear it is that Mr. Muni was to have opened in in Yesterday's Magic.

Don't forget Mr. Muni is impersonating a drunkard and a has-been at the Guild. The drunkard in Maddoc Thomas gives Mr. Muni a release for one kind of acting; the has-been for another. So, as goes without saying, does the fact that genius is still supposed to be burning in the breast of this old eccentric.

Mr. Muni rises to all of these acting opportunities with yeast-like inevitability. He has his fun. He plays with a scrupulous eye for detail. He overlooks no characterizing particulars, even when he dawdles over some. He caresses every chance, and does his capable best to make the most of it. Some-

times he is tempted to do too much and to work far too slowly. Such a scene, for example, is the one at the outset during which, while pretending to be reading a newspaper, Mr. Muni succumbs to a script which has been sent him. This is all too easy and too obvious for comfort. As a matter of fact, it is almost as embarrassing as are many of the over-stressed and unbelievable moments in Mr. Williams' writing.

Jessica Tandy plays charmingly, with genuine radiance and a shimmering sincerity as the crippled daughter. Brenda Forbes is hilariously funny as a comic landlady. And Margaret Douglass, with a brave new accent, is no less amusing as an admirer of the old actor who is entertainingly drawn.

Even so, and in spite of a capable production by the Guild, Mr. Williams' script is so full of bad Barrie, poor Dickens, half-baked Saroyan and full-fledged tedium that this straw from Broome Stages proves to be more enervating than diverting. No one could guess from the theatrical clichés in which it abounds that Yesterday's Magic was written by the same Mr. Williams who wrote The Corn Is Green or even Night Must Fall. The chief thing Mr. Williams' new play makes one hope is that before long a good actor will set around to playing King Lear and stop bothering about those grease-paint valentines in which an old actor is always shown as being ready to play the king in the unchallengeable safety of the wings.

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
April 15, 1942

Actor's Progress

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

NOW we have Paul Muni, the occasional fugitive from Hollywood, as a drink-sodden ham, striving wistfully to stage a comeback as King Lear, while his loyal daughter cheers him on with pathetic fidelity. Then, in the other corner, is Miss Jessica Tandy, one of England's ablest young actresses, as the lame and loyal girl, whose romance with a song writer is considerably upset by her obligation to stick with her ranting parent. Both of them are to be found rather emotionally upset by their problems in life and art in a dull, futile and lugubrious play by Emyln Williams that is known in this country as

"Yesterday's Magic." In England its title was "The Light of Heart," but in any country you may call it an adventure in tedium.

On behalf of Mr. Williams, who proved with "The Corn Is Green" that he can write an admirable play, it should be said that probably "Yesterday's Magic" is not as lachrymose a drama as it seems in Mr. Muni's somewhat wrogonese performance. A careful and conscientious actor, who captures his effects with great deliberation, Mr. Muni goes about the business of being a broken-down thespian amid such gloomy detail that he casts an additional pall about a drama that is not any too gay at the outset. Although it is intended as a tragedy, this "Yesterday's Magic" does have some incidental suggestions of lightness about it, for Mr. Williams can turn an excellent comic line. Here, however, everything is prodigiously melancholy.

These tear-drenched stories of beaten actors, defeated by alcohol, and their despairing efforts to return to their oldtime glories, have a way of running to pattern, and Mr. Williams has done little to vary what is likely to be a pretty dubious anecdote in the first

place. Superhuman efforts are required these days to interest us in the plight of these straining, pompous players, while even their downtrodden daughters, with their misfortunes in life and love, have a way of seeming less tragic than the playwrights would have us feel. In "Yesterday's Magic" there is a determined effort to make us all believe that what we are witnessing is touching and poignant, but somehow it seems even a bit more trivial than usual.

This is certainly not the type of role that best fits Mr. Muni, since there is little of the required grand manner about him and he must work desperately to simulate it. Miss Tandy, on the other hand, is perfectly at home in the sympathetic part of the daughter, and she plays it with all of her characteristic forthrightness, understanding and charm. The rest have much less to do, but Miss Margaret Douglass manages to make a credible character of the faithful and unappreciated adorress of the collapsed actor, and James Monks succeeds in being amusing and real as an amiable policeman from Wales. Alfred Drake does everything possible with the equivocal role of the daughter's sweetheart. "Yesterday's Magic" is not one of the Theatre Guild masterpieces.

"Yesterday's Magic"

NEW YORK SUN
April 15, 1942

'Yesterday's Magic,' With Paul Muni, Is Presented At the Guild Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

EMLYN WILLIAMS'S "Yesterday's Magic," which was played at the Guild Theater last evening, wears its rye without a difference. It is sadly sweet and sweetly familiar: it is a leisurely piece, full of opportunities for the actors and long speeches and accustomed turns of plot. If you do not ask very much from the theater, you may find it comfortable drama and probably will enjoy seeing Paul Muni playing a lovable old dissipated man who remembers glorious days.

The glorious days of Maddoc Thomas, the character played with relish by Mr. Muni, were spent in the theater. He is one of those fine old men of the theater upon which the

theater, which loves to stare in its own mirror, so evidently dotes. He is sustained in his shiftless, but picturesque, poverty by his lovely daughter, who is lame because he fell with her in babyhood, being then in his cups. Early in Mr. Williams' drama she seems about to rehabilitate him. For a time things go smoothly, but as an experienced member of the audience you are not deceived.

You are ahead of Mr. Williams' almost from the moment he starts. The old darling, whose cronies are so bohemian and at bottom such good-hearted alcoholics, will pull himself together, aided by his daughter. He will be on the eve of a grand comeback in the theater. He will be about to make his appearance in a famous Shakespearean role. Will it be as Lear? It will be as Lear. Will it be in Covent Garden? It will be in Covent Garden. And will something crack just when all seems perfect, and will he, at the end of the second act, succumb again to temptation and make for the nearest bar? You can bet he will.

And during the last act, too, you trot along by Mr. Williams' characters to meet him if he should falter. The girl by now is about to be married, but her conscience reproaches her. Her conscience triumphs. She will not go to America with the man she loves. She must not leave her father to shift for himself. The lovers part, in a scene which the old actor overhears. Will he accept the sacrifice or will he—? And do you need to be told?

Mr. Williams' who is also the author of "The Corn Is Green," has done this primer

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
April 15, 1942

Paul Muni and Jessica Tandy In 'Yesterday's Magic' at Guild

"Yesterday's Magic," drama by Emyln Williams. Produced by the Theatre Guild, at the Guild Theatre, New York, April 14, 1942.

★ ★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

I HAVE a feeling that we, the playgoers, may have been waiting for another good old sentimental drama with which to conclude a season in which the search for escapist plays has been both desperate and disappointing.

If we have, or if you have, it can be found—at the Guild, where Emyln Williams' "Yesterday's Magic" opened last night. Yesterday's magic it is, too, in form as well as story.

NEW YORK TIMES
April 15, 1942

THE PLAY IN REVIEW "Yesterday's Magic"

By BROOKS ATKINSON

AFTER "The Corn Is Green" comes "Yesterday's Magic" in Emyln Williams' library of plays. Although it is theatrically attractive a good part of the time and also amusing in odd bits, it comes a long way after Mr. Williams' autobiographic story of life in Wales. For it is an actor's joint piece, written cleverly without much drive and no real conviction. Last evening the Theatre Guild staged it on the home grounds with Paul Muni playing the part that Geoffrey Tearle and Mr. Williams acted in succession in England.

Mr. Muni is a meticulous actor with an excellent speaking voice and a pride in his

The crippled child and the weaking father, if you please, are its talking points. Or the Cordelia and King Lear theme, if you like that classification better.

It is noted in the program that it is a story of today, but there must be something a little wrong about that. There is not so much as a word of reference to a Second World War that I remember.

Certainly no action in the play or any motivation of the characters is tied in with the present conflict. No mention of the blitz, nor of the Spring offensive, or of Winnie or Beaverbrook.

Not even any delay in the hero's securing transportation and passport to come to America to hear music of his composition played at the Music Hall.

Pleasantly Familiar

It is just a simple and familiar story of an old actor who, for eight years has been victim of the hold that liquor has upon him, and of the loyalty of the lame daughter who stood by. I suspect Emyln Williams wrote it first years ago.

But it was written by an actor-author who loves the old actors, and the older theatre. And it is played by actors who feel a sort of filial obligation toward and admirably adapt a sentimental interest in the ne'er-do-wells of a profession that has never quite grown up.

Paul Muni has come on from Hollywood to play the old actor. Evidently because the established character actor seldom has the courage to refuse a chance to play that old

craft. Cast in the part of an old, ramshackle actor with a fondness for the bottle, he is giving an elaborately detailed performance. But to this playgoer it is uninspired, better suited for an academic thesis than for an evening's pleasure in the theatre. By taking the part literally, Mr. Muni catches Mr. Williams on his weakest side.

For "Yesterday's Magic" is no more than a popular story about an aged, broken-down actor who is living in boozey squalor with a crippled daughter and tries to re-establish himself in the profession. By a fortunate chance he gets a small part in a play, succeeds with it and straightens himself out with his daughter's help. On the strength of that test of sobriety, C. B. Cochran decides to present him at Covent Garden, as Lear. But on the eve of the opening performance the old man learns by chance that his daughter is about to be married and has been waiting until after the strain of his ordeal is over before telling him. The shock of losing his daughter so soon knocks him off balance. He is too drunk to play Lear when the curtain time comes.

A good many of us share Mr. Williams' interest in the raggle-taggle aspect of the theatre and of the disorderly revelry of life in a rooming-house. If Mr. Muni were a volatile actor with a gift for humor, this first act might be a thing of great, instead of temper-

'YESTERDAY'S MAGIC'

A play in three acts by Emyln Williams; staged by Reginald Denham; designed by Watson Barratt; presented at the Guild Theater, April 14, 1942, by the Theatre Guild. The cast:

Mrs. Banner	 Brenda Forbes
Barty	 Patrick O'Moore
Fan	 Cathleen Cordell
Bevan	 James Monks
Maddoc Thomas	 Paul Muni
Catrin	 Jessica Tandy
Robert	 Alfred Drake
Mrs. Lohman	 Margaret Douglas

exercise in sentiment very nicely. He has created—aided by two excellent actresses—a pair of comical incidental characters. He has written his whole play as if he believed in it. He has also written it as if nothing had happened in the theater or in the world, for thirty years.

Mr. Muni has his playing well polished and brings out every familiar, crochety facet of the character. It can hardly, however, have proved a very challenging role. Jessica Tandy plays the part of the daughter with her own fine freshness and Alfred Drake is effectively sincere as her lover, Brenda Forbes and Margaret Douglas, in two small roles written with comic gusto, are bracingly funny; the staging, if deliberate, is smoothly finished. But "Yesterday's Magic" is also yesterday's drama.

fellow who knew fame, lost it and staged a comeback before he died. The Muni performance is knowing and sympathetic, and he is a master of the technique of his calling.

Miss Tandy Featured

Jessica Tandy is the lame daughter, and she, with the help of her author and her director, Reginald Denham, is able to keep the part out of the maudlin pits that yawn around about her.

Alfred Drake is the flourishing and plump young lodger who helps get the old actor his second chance and falls in love with Jessica, as who wouldn't?

There is a touch of a newer theatre in the character of a lady theatre fanatic who insists, even in her prosperous days, on standing in line for pit seats to welcome her old hero back to the theatre. She is splendidly played by Margaret Douglas. And a good old substitute for the Cockney landlady well played by Brenda Forbes.

The drama critics won't have the least trouble finding items to make sport of in "Yesterday's Magic." But it wouldn't surprise me if a lot of playgoers accepted it as a happy return to the real escapist drama of which they have felt a desperate lack this season.

The setting, a practical low-ceilinged English lodging, is by Watson Barratt, and Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner sat in with Mr. Denham on direction conferences. Last night's audience was large and apparently happy. It included Eleanor Roosevelt.

After the first act, "Yesterday's Magic" becomes eminently respectable, and Mr. Williams has written some excellent romantic scenes between the daughter and a song writer who lives across the hall. But the emotion they arouse is artificial. For "Yesterday's Magic" is a contrived play. It is easy for Mr. Williams to write a scene that acts well, but it is hard for him to make anything more than an uneven show out of stage tricks and dramatic humors.

Reginald Denham has staged it with some enthusiasm, and Watson Barratt has endowed it with an alluringly romantic setting that is resourcefully lighted. Most of the acting has the sort of bounce that makes the meat of Mr. Williams' foibles. That excellent actress, Jessica Tandy, is playing the daughter lightly in perfect taste; and Alfred Drake, who has never had a good part before, is playing the lover with force and clarity. Brenda Forbes' messy landlady is a little gem of low character comedy. As a juggernaut old friend, Margaret Douglas is in great form. Cathleen Cordell, James Monks and Patrick O'Moore are giving breezy performances in other parts.

But Mr. Williams' improvisation of a ready-made theatre shop is not sturdy enough to sustain Mr. Muni's heavy acting. There is nothing harum-scarum about Mr. Muni's portrait of a rebellious and rickety old ham, and his style betrays the shabbiness of Mr. Williams' dramatic ideas.

"Yesterday's Magic"

NEW YORK POST

April 15, 1942

"Yesterday's Magic" Stars Paul Muni at the Guild

By WILLELLA WALDORF

EMYLYN WILLIAMS, the Welsh actor-playwright whose "The Corn Is Green" gave Ethel Barrymore the best role she has had in years, has not done as well for Paul Muni in "Yesterday's Magic," produced by the Theatre Guild last night at its home theatre in 52d Street.

Mr. Williams, of course, did not write "The Corn Is Green" for Miss Barrymore any more than he wrote "Yesterday's Magic" for Mr. Muni, but "The Corn Is Green" is an infinitely better play.

When it was first produced in London two years ago, "Yesterday's Magic" was known as "The Light of Heart" and the role of the once-famous London actor who drank himself off the stage was played by Godfrey Tearle. Later on the author himself had a try at it. It is the sort of part actors who have not drunk themselves off the stage love to play. They have, in fact, been playing it for years.

Fallen Matinee Idol

Steeped in the theatre, Mr. Williams writes

fondly of the past triumphs and present heartbreak of his fallen matinee idol, Maddoc Thomas, who once acted with Irving and Tree and was visited by Ellen Terry. Now, when he should have become one of England's greatest actors, he is a besotted wreck living in slovenly quarters in a Long Acre rooming house, looked after like a child by the crippled daughter who has given up a musical career of her own for his sake.

When an ambitious young composer moves in downstairs and a chance to return to the theatre presents itself, the once celebrated thespian steps from the role of Santa Claus in Selfridge's toy department to that of a gentleman of title in a West End musical comedy, and thence, with the aid of a lady admirer with money, to the dizzy heights of "King Lear," no less, to be produced by Cochran, and staged by Gielgud, at the Covent Garden Opera House!

Mr. Williams does not do things by halves. When his hero is down, he is down. When he goes up, he ascends into the stratosphere. The higher he aspires, of course, the harder the inevitable fall. "Yesterday's Magic" is such familiar stuff in the theatre that it is almost immediately obvious where the author has ever seen a play before that the end of Act 2 is bound to find Maddoc Thomas tumbling into the gutter again.

The Old, Old Story

After the catastrophe, Mr. Williams tucks on a third act in which the loyal daughter, rebellious at first and pining to live her own life, unselfishly sacrifices her happiness as the wife of the young composer to devote herself to her erring parent. And of course said parent overbears it all from behind a screen. A tragic end for father. Not so tragic for daughter. Curtain.

All this is told without too much sloppy sentimentality, and Reginald Denham has directed it knowingly, but it is such old stuff in the theatre and is so laboriously ground out by the author, who likes to linger over every rueful scene, that the play soon becomes a tedious affair. Nor is it helped by the fact that although the spotlight is on Maddoc Thomas as the star performer, the audience is often more interested in what happens to the daughter.

The Performance

Paul Muni gives a carefully detailed but hardly inspired performance as the man who couldn't come back when he had the chance, and he is inevitably thrust into the background much of the time when Jessica Tandy and Alfred Drake are on the stage.

Miss Tandy is well cast as the daughter and her performance is highly effective except at odd moments of excitement or annoyance when she lets her voice fly out the window and is inclined to become inaudible. Mr. Drake plays the composer with considerable charm and forcefulness. Since turning from singing to dramatic roles, he has become one of Broadway's most personable leading men. Margaret Douglass plays the moneyed "matinee girl" with a strange, unidentifiable accent but a sure technique and much humor. Cathleen Cordell sustains the role of the "hussy" nicely throughout the play, and Patrick O'Moore and James Monks help out when they can.

Everybody's favorite, however, will be Brenda Forbes as Mrs. Banner, the slatternly landlady who pops in and out through the evening bringing much-needed comic relief. "Gentleman rang up twice. A Mr. Rabbit," she informs the composer.

"Do you mean Mr. Robertson?" he inquires.

"That's right."

taste, the "picturesque" characters, including that ultimate horror, the intellectual policeman.

The joker is that, having sacrificed drama to theater, "Yesterday's Magic" is still not very good theater. The sentiment is too sham to draw even facile tears. Only a little of the humor is bright; the rest is too arch and high-pitched. There is, besides, too much pretty talk, too much padding and a total lack of suspense. If a playwright tells a story you've known from childhood, about all you can do is be sure that he's left nothing out. Mr. Williams decidedly hasn't.

The Theatre Guild has given the play a better production than it deserves, but it still tells little. Paul Muni plays the old actor ingratiatingly enough and manages to make you believe in his past; but he can't make him very interesting, and in fact is wasting his time. Jessica Tandy brings much more than her personal charm to the role of the daughter, but it isn't enough. Alfred Drake, Margaret Douglass and Patrick Moore all give sound performances; and as the be-fraggled landlady, Brenda Forbes gives a very amusing one.

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"

April 15, 1942

Paul Muni Is Wasting His Time

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

IN *The Corn Is Green* Emyln Williams's bad angel was vanquished by his good one, for if the plot succumbs to shoddiness, the theme was valid, and warmly and honestly felt. But in *Yesterday's Magic*, which brings Paul Muni back to Broadway, the bad angel does more than triumph at the end—it is rampant throughout. Mr. Williams has not only chosen to tell one of the most battered of sentimental stories, but he has shamelessly exploited it right up to the hilt.

What he gives us is an aging and once celebrated actor who, having long ago ruined his career through drink, attempts a belated comeback. He has a daughter who has sacrificed her life to his; and she, in good time, acquires a suitor. Everything looks fine for everyone until on opening night—our hero is seeking to regain his laurels by nothing less than *King Lear*—the old fellow falls off the wagon. Since Mr. Williams is at all times deaf to truth and blind to reality, the rest is automatic, right down to the girl nobly giving up her fiancé to stick to the old man, and the old man nobly flinging himself out of the window.

As drama, it is quite impossible to take any of this seriously. It's not so much that the plot is trite as that the entire treatment is trashy. Mr. Williams can't even resist the old boy's final gesture, in defiance of the fact that weaklings of his sort almost never have the guts to cease being burdens. But perhaps it's just as well, for otherwise Mr. Williams wouldn't have had a perfect score. He doesn't miss a trick throughout. Everything is there: the phony literary writing, the grubby rooming-house atmosphere, the sentimental slopping over, the appalling

"Autumn Hill"

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE

April 14, 1942

New England Idyll

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

LET'S see if we could interest ourselves this morning in a quaint little whimsey about an old maid and a counterfeiter. Would it fascinate you to learn that the poor woman had been badly treated by the late mistress to whom she had acted as companion and that an apparently nice young man brought sunlight

into her life? Would it arouse you to know that the nice young man had evil companions and led a wicked, reckless life? Would it be of the slightest concern to you to be told that eventually poor Gusset Rogers discovered the dashing fellow's secret and had to shoot him? Even if such eccentric happenings might otherwise appeal to you, I do not think you would be excited by them as they are described in the new play called "Autumn Hill."

For here is that unpleasant anomaly, the melodrama without excitement or suspense, it is the intention of the authors, Norma Mitchell and John Harris, to start out slowly. Even if such eccentric happenings might otherwise appeal to you, I do not think you would be excited by them as they are described in the new play called "Autumn Hill."

There may be one or two moments of mild melodramatic entertainment throughout the course of the three acts, but the rest is dullness. And a very acute sort of dullness at that.

Amid such desultory proceedings it can hardly be said that the actors have many chances to cover themselves with glory. Miss Beth Merrill as the old maid manages an uncertain sort of part with sense and good taste. Jack Effrat, the brother of a local sports writer, does nothing to bring into disrepute the professions of journalism and thespianism by his matter-of-fact portrayal of the dashing bad boy. Miss Elizabeth Sutherland, as a particularly disagreeable gang girl, achieves little in the way of making the part any more pleasant than she found it, and she does everything possible in the interest of their art. If we can't get a good play these nights, we might at least settle for a sprightly melodrama, but "Autumn Hill" certainly isn't it.

"Autumn Hill"

NEW YORK SUN

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'Autumn Hill,' a Melodrama, Is Offered at the Booth Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

CRIME and violence concern the authors of "Autumn Hill," which opened at the Booth Theater last evening. A nice New England spinster is put in peril, a pretty girl who is probably a moll snarls like an angry cat and a too-inquisitive clergyman meets his fate in a cellar, down in the very den of the counterfeiters. All this should scare us silly, but I am afraid it scares us only now and then.

Norma Mitchell and John Harris contrived these goings-on, which, somehow, sound more grisly in summary than in the authors' rather placid telling. They begin their play with a discussion of old Mathilda, evidently a born hellion, who ground her companion under

foot and was unkind to her sister and her nephew. Mathilda is quite a character, but she turns out to have remarkably little to do with the play. She is merely a spot of atmosphere, brought in to add a touch of starkness to the scene.

She gives way in the second act to her nephew, who has a post office box in Brooklyn and is hence instantly suspect. Sure enough, he is a gangster, complete with assistants and a lady known as Julia. Brooklyn has become too hot for them and they have escaped with only their clothes, their car and, as it belatedly turns out, their printing press. They hope to inherit Mathilda's money and depart; legal technicalities force the nephew and the girl to set up housekeeping and run off counterfeit in the basement.

Thereafter melodrama creeps from scene to scene until many things have happened. About this you may, if you like, learn more at the Booth. "Autumn Hill" must be allowed to keep its secrets. They are not many nor, on the whole, beyond guessing.

And, although now and then it flares into agreeable violence, "Autumn Hill" is only adequate as melodrama. The authors strive for the chilling atmosphere which is the life of such things as this and for the kind of suspense which keeps an audience on the edges of its seats. But the atmosphere is only chilly around the edges and the suspense is intermittent. I am afraid I wondered rather

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'Autumn Hill' Opens At the Booth Theatre

Beth Merrill and Dorrit Kelton Appear in Drama of New England Characters

By JOHN ANDERSON

WHEN the curtain rose at the Booth last night on a dark paneled New England living room, Beth Merrill and Dorrit Kelton stepped through the door all dressed in black, for they had just been to old Miss Mathilda Hatfield's funeral. It seemed a waste of time for them to take off their mourning, for the play began gasping for dialogue almost immediately and passed away soon after that, though like King Charles, it was an unconscionable time a-dying. Three mortal acts in

solemn fact, and a couple of groaning intermissions.

The play is called "Autumn Hill" and it was written by Norma Mitchell and John Harris, and presented by Max Liebman. It tells in a dreary monotone the tale of Gussie Rogers, a New England spinster, who spent 20 miserable years nursing mean old Miss Mathilda on the promise that she would get the property, and then discovering when she got home from the graveyard that there was no will. You could have knocked Miss Gussie down with a manuscript.

But it was not long before Miss Gussie found that old Mathilda had left something besides her property, for she had left a nephew, Tony Seldon, a rascally youngster, who arrived (as if the authors had just blown a whistle for him) from Brooklyn with three associates in counterfeit, all looking for a hideaway. What could be better for the purpose than a nice, respectable New England home, with prim Miss Gussie for a "front."

While this subject seemed to fascinate the authors, they were unable to communicate their enthusiasm to your correspondent, and there were passages when I felt that my own lack of interest was shared by members of the cast.

Plot of the Play

The plot of the play comes down to the fact that Miss Gussie at last feels some emotion stirring in her frustrated life, and believes, even when she finds that the naughty young fellow is printing currency in the cellar, that he can be reformed. So she tries to rescue him from his blonde "secretary," who is one

'AUTUMN HILL'

A play in three acts by Norma Mitchell and John Harris; directed by Ronald Hammond; setting by Lemuel Ayers; lighting by Feder; presented at the Booth Theater on April 13, 1942, by Max Liebman. The cast:

Gussie Rogers	Beth Merrill
Mary Barton	Dorrit Kelton
Bob Ferguson	William Roerick
Judge Hendricks	Clyde Franklin
Tony Seldon	Jack Effrat
Julie	Elizabeth Sutherland
Al	Robert Williams
Frank	James Gregory

absently how it was going to end, and every now and then wondered when this is not as it should be. In the theater of menace the shiver should be timeless.

Miss Beth Merrill makes the spinster attractively human and Jack Effrat is sinister and appealing by turns—both rather uncertain turns—as the dangerous nephew, Dorrit Kelton, William Roerick, Clyde Franklin, Elizabeth Sutherland and the rest perform efficiently enough and Lemuel Ayers has designed an appropriately shadowy interior. Few unexpected horrors emerge from the shadows, unfortunately.

of the gang, only to have her hopes dashed when Tony murders the local minister. That's a bit thick, even for Gussie, so as the last act curtain begins its slow and tardy descent I see her maternally shooting Tony in the back to save him from the G-men who were at the moment knocking at the front door as frantically as I was searching for an exit.

As a character study "Autumn Hill" lacks both focus and insight. The central interest wavers between Gussie and Tony, with neither one sharply dominant, and the other characters range from the affably pleasant sketch of a young minister to a foolish and incredible portrait of the lady counterfeiter.

Miss Merrill's Role

Miss Merrill plays Gussie with the wan, repressed emphasis by which the stage so often suggests that New England spinsters begin life as amateur ramrods. With stronger direction than Ronald Hammond has given her she might have achieved a more powerful portrayal in spite of the dialogue, but the point is probably academic and useless. Jack Effrat succeeds in depicting Tony for the weakling rat that he is, and William Roerick sketches the minister amiably and easily. The fact that Elizabeth Sutherland as Tony's girl friend has some of the season's silliest lines and situations to face should be considered as suitable excuse for an otherwise inexcusable performance.

In the Broadway landscape "Autumn Hill" is, I fear, just another dramatic declivity, if not a hole, in the ground, to be marked by detour signals and similar warnings for the unwary.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM

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Autumn Hill Dawdles Through First Two Acts

By JOHN MASON BROWN

GIVEN some counterfeiters, who pretend to be authors, hard at work in the cellar of a prim household in a New England village, and you are bound to become interested, however faintly, in discovering the when and how of these villains' undoing. Not much interested the case of Autumn Hill, which depends upon such a situation for its plot, but at least mildly interested when the last act at last promises to get going.

The fact that you become interested in a

play's ending can, unfortunately, have little or nothing to do with your interest in what happens while it is running its course. Norma Mitchell and John Harris' new melodrama at the Booth proves this conclusively. Miss Mitchell will be remembered as the co-author with Wilbur Daniel Steele of Post Road, a thriller about some kidnapers in a roadside boarding house which kept audiences caring throughout. I wish the same thing could be said of Autumn Hill.

Moves With Congressional Speed

Moving with the speed of a Congressional committee, it dawdles through its first two acts. Slowly it establishes that the nephew of the dead New England homie, in whose house the action takes place, is by profession the worst kind of infatigable. Just as slowly it discusses whether the aforesaid home will be willed to this nephew or to the spinster who for years has lived there with the tyrannical aunt. Then, at last, it comes down to cases for a few minutes—to a murder case, to be precise. Now there's no doubt about it, the knowledge that there's a fresh cadaver in the cellar and that the police are on the job can make you sit up against your better judgment. For

these active moments, which end up in as unsatisfactory, though managerially economical, a final curtain as I can remember, I am grateful. I only wish that Autumn Hill gave me more for which to be grateful.

The Work of the Players

Beth Merrill works hard and well in a stock company way as the Yankee spinster to whom the home is left. As counterfeiter, go, Jack Effrat is passable enough. And it is always pleasant to see the unvarying Clyde Franklin. But as the miserable strumpet, posing as the counterfeiter's secretary, Elizabeth Sutherland succeeds in being as unconvincing as the part's writing, which is something of a feat.

The dead stretches in the script (of which there are many) are left unquickened by Ronald Hammond's wooden direction. All in all, as a private remark in the lobby at Sunday night's preview, "Autumn Hill is the kind of show you wouldn't mind seeing if you had nothing else to do and hadn't paid for your tickets, but it's the kind of show you would find hard to take if you thought at all of where else you might be for the same amount."